

Teacher's Pal



*Should you
'friend' your
teacher?*



During the first week of school, English teacher Randy Turner, 52, chatted with new and former students, answered homework questions, and complimented his students on their writing exercises—all through his MySpace page.

Turner, who teaches eighth graders at South Middle School in Joplin, Mo., considers MySpace a valuable tool for communicating with his students. The kids relate to him more since finding him on the popular social networking site. "All of a sudden, it was something they had in common with their teacher, and it astounded them," he says. Turner's account is public, so parents can access it as well.

Today's students are tech savvy. A 2007 study by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) found that 71 percent of students ages 9 to 17 who have Internet access use social networking tools at least weekly. Given the popularity of MySpace and Facebook, many teachers have started using the sites to connect with students about classroom matters. However, some people say the online friendships can lead to inappropriate relationships. In Missouri, legislators are considering regulating student-teacher contact on social networking sites.

YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND?

Proponents say social networking is a useful way to reach students on their own technological turf. The NSBA report found that teens spend about nine hours a week on social networking, which includes blogging, texting, and posting on discussion boards. More than 50 percent of teens use those tools to discuss schoolwork specifically.

Turner's students message him questions about homework and sometimes turn in their assignments via MySpace. It's particularly helpful, Turner says, for communicating with students who are reluctant to speak in class. "I have had kids that I don't think have said two words in class that will write up a storm on MySpace," he notes. "If they get on there and read, to me that's an accomplishment, too."

Steve Hargadon runs a social network for educators called Classroom 2.0 (www.classroom20.com). He says shying away from social networking technology would be a big mistake for teachers. "The Web is becoming a conversation," he says. "If we don't teach our children how to be in the conversation, then they'll miss out."

A TEACHER, NOT A BUDDY

Missouri State Rep. Jane Cunningham (R-Chesterfield) says she was shocked to see inappropriate messages and pictures that teachers in the Kansas City, Mo., area had sent to students via Facebook and MySpace. She's sponsoring a bill that would require every school district to have a written policy on electronic communication between teachers and students. The bill would also prohibit educators from using social networking accounts that are open to students but closed to parents and administrators. "Communication is a positive thing; we just need to make sure that it is a safe thing," says Cunningham.

Educators and parents need to set clear guidelines about social networking, says Robert J. Shoop, director of the Cargill Center for Ethical Leadership at Kansas State University. "The dangers involved in the unsupervised communication between teachers and students can not only destroy teachers' reputations but can also lead to a slippery slope where friendships become more intimate," he says. "I think teachers are there to be mentors, not to be best friends or buddies."

WHAT DO YOU THINK? Should students and teachers be "friends"? Let us know at edce@weeklyreader.com.

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